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The Navajo People

By Mary Lynn Bushong

When you think of the Navajo people, what do you think of? Do you think of woven blankets? Do you think of silver and turquoise jewelry? What do you know of the people?



The Navajo and Apache were once a single people. Even now they are very much alike.

The Navajo believed that they were created in an underworld. They passed through twelve of those worlds before they got to this one. Four sacred mountains sit on the corners of their land, Mount Taylor, Mount Blanca, Mount Hesperus, and the San Francisco Peaks.

Young people learned about ceremonies, legends, and tribal law from older members of the tribe. There was even a celebration for a baby's first laugh. Girls learned from the older women. Boys learned with the men and had to pass a test of courage before becoming a man.

Families were very important to the Navajo. Every family belonged to a clan. There are more than 100 clans. Children belonged to the clan of their mother. Boys would have to go to another clan to get married.

Homes were called hogans. They were eight-sided log cabins. The roof was made so it was dome shaped. It was

sometimes covered with a layer of earth. This kept it cool in summer and warm in winter. The doorway always faced east. This was so the people could greet the rising sun every morning.

Sheep were an important part of Navajo life. Their meat fed the families, and their wool could be woven into blankets and rugs. Bison were hunted for their meat and hides. The hides were tanned and traded to other tribes.

The Navajo kept gardens to grow vegetables. They grew corn and squash. The corn kernels were bagged and stored in the hogan. The ripened squash was hung from the ceiling in the hogan. They also gathered native nuts and berries.

After the Spanish came, the Navajo discovered horses. They and the Apache were the first native tribes to acquire the animals. Their speed made bison hunting much easier.

As the use of horses for riding became more common, the Navajo and Apache used them to make raids on Spanish and Pueblo settlements. In addition to horses, the people also got cattle.

By the mid 1800's, people of all kinds were moving into Navajo territory looking for land to settle on. Hispanic, Indian, and American cultures clashed. Navajo women and children were enslaved. Navajo men began making raids to get back at the trouble-makers.

In 1862, Kit Carson was sent to get control of the Navajo and Apache, killing them all if necessary. In 1863, soldiers arrived at the Canyon de Chelly which was the center of Navajo land. There, they murdered the people who tried to fight back, slaughtered the livestock, and burned their homes and crops.

The people fled into hiding into secret places along the canyon walls. Facing starvation, they surrendered during

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the winter. Many died at Fort Canby due to dysentery and exposure. Then the people were forced to make The Long Walk to Bosque Redondo in New Mexico, three hundred miles away. Those too slow to keep up-the old, sick, and young-were shot.

For four years the people were forced to live in poor shelters and grow crops in poor ground. Then in 1868, a new treaty was signed allowing the people to return to their homeland. Out of the estimated 12,000 Navajo, it is estimated that 3,000 died at the hands of the U.S. government.

The Navajo people have continued to grow in number. They are now one of the largest tribes in America. They have a growing reputation for their beautiful weaving, silverwork, and sand painting.

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Questions

- _____ 1. The Navajo and Apache were once one people.
- A. True
 - B. False

2. The Navajo's main foods were:

- _____ 3. The hogan's door always faced:

- A. West
- B. South
- C. North
- D. East

4. Why did it face that way?

- _____ 5. Navajo land had a mountain marking each of its four sides.

- A. True
- B. False

- _____ 6. Each Navajo family belonged to one of these:

- A. A clan
- B. A hogan
- C. A village
- D. A tribe

- _____ 7. The Navajo got their horses from:

- A. Farmers
- B. Other tribes
- C. The Spanish
- D. Mexico



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